OPEN CONVERSATIONS

BY

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Open Conversations is a series of five oil paintings inspired by commonplace surfaces I come across in my daily commutes. A long concrete wall, a concave brick façade, a gridded light fixture, the upholstered interior of a reading cubicle and a white wall from my shared studio space; upon discovering these locations I began connecting with them intimately, cultivating with every encounter a moment of reflection and transcendence. The passing of my grandmother brought me even closer to them. I found refuge in these lonely places. In their quiet semblance I saw reflected the stark silence of the universe and the eminence of death that overwhelms my soul. Taking an existentialist approach I fully embraced my human condition, this inability to prove the existence of God or an afterlife where I could perhaps one day reunite with my lost love. Yet, resilient, I found renewed faith and purpose in the act of depicting these spaces, hoping to cultivate, with every session, a spiritual experience. These paintings are ultimately a manifestation of my love for life and a very personal contribution to our indefatigable quest for knowledge.
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Para Abue, con todo mi amor.
PART I: THE CONCRETE WALL

It’s about 8:15 in the morning and I am entering the stairwell that leads to the classroom where I will be teaching. The door opens into a dim grey room of brick and concrete, a somber space my weary soul would rather escape from sooner than later. I am confronted by a series of steps. Hard and heavy as the cement that shapes them, they almost seem to heighten the weight of my backpack and my tired body. Ascending away from the shadows I soon walk into a landing bathed in fluorescent light, where a long concrete wall stands (Plates 1-2). Before continuing my daily journey up, I pause to contemplate it for a short time.

A constellation of small and medium-sized holes draw my attention, stubborn pockets of oxygen that once refused to give way to the hot mortar. I smile as I think of a much younger self being punished at school with the fruitless task of counting the holes of a classroom wall. Powerless and defeated I succumbed to such crevices, which seemed to extend into infinity like those dark starred skies in the quiet, sweet town of my youth. How ironic it is to find myself now, after so many years, willingly pursuing a similar task!

Day after day, with every pause of contemplation, the concrete wall becomes more alluring in its revelations. I slowly discover forms, colors and textures that charge its surface with life. As my eyes shift their focus towards the deep blue-green grey, as cold to see as it is to touch, I am transported to a limitless expanse. In the silence and emptiness of the room I feel manifested the absence of my departed grandmother, her tender touch, her undying devotion for me. For twenty-four years I felt complete with her. Now I yearn for the part of me that is no more.
Alone in that room I am left to cope with a great hollowness, a vast, empty space, a deafening silence, an unconquerable immensity. Loneliness, despair, anguish and fear ensue. The imminence of death is overwhelming. I am sorely reminded of my mortality and that of the loved ones left on this plane, whose loss I must also endure should I come to survive them. I feel the light flicker and buzz. A student passes by and says hello, perhaps thinking it odd to see me staring into nothingness. But I am not, for I see a wall through which I can hear Sartre.

A Philosophical Examination

Jean-Paul Sartre, humanist father, existentialist phantom, arise from the shadows and breathe wisdom into my desperate being! I ask. What was that you spoke about the human drama? You said God was non-existent, his presence impossible to prove? So vagabond souls we are then according to you, cast out into this world, abandoned? Alone we are left to carry the weight of our freedom, destined to define ourselves, and to make hard choices. This loneliness you describe, along with the absence of a divine father, counselor, and judge, constitutes the source of our lifelong anguish and despair. (Sartre, Kaufman 350)

The light flickers again and I am brought back to the room. I don’t seem to be afflicted as much for the weight of my freedom as I am for the awareness of death that this concrete wall incites. Now I seem to be staring at a tombstone, and the dimness of the room inspires the thought of a cloudy heaven. Very early on in my life I was seized by the dread of losing my loved ones, especially my grandmother. For years I prepared myself, strengthening my faith in God and gaining confidence in my belief that death is not the end. My convictions proved a strong moral support to my grandmother, who, towards the end, seemed to have grown fearful and
pessimistic about her fate. It seems ironic that after her passing I am now the one in need of consolation. Never before had I felt so abandoned, my constructions of a peaceful heaven so dark and unclear. I find myself looking for signs in dreams, silhouettes in the shadows, whispers in the wind, tangible confirmations of my beliefs, silent words affirming that everything is going to be alright. Yet I hear and see nothing but the sounds and colors of this very material world. The more I reach out to the nether lands for confirmation and solace, the more physical the wall in front of me becomes. Futile is my strife. I am left with no choice but to surrender to the mysteries of life and to live in the present.

I believe I can almost hear Albert Camus whispering: “Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 10).

Camus believed that our constant strife for reason and knowledge defines the human drama. He thought of this restless search as futile. Without ultimate truths we are left with only more questions, paradoxes, and confusion. For this reason, Camus perceived this world as irrational and absurd. To me, that overwhelming silence which hears and devours all questions, offering nothing but more quietude in return, has now become the primary source from which I draw inspiration.

Aware that this world is illogical and trapped in the inescapability of this condition I am forced to cope with it. Camus, hero of the absurd, illuminates my path with three possible alternatives. An individual who has given up the search for ultimate truth can lose purpose in life and might choose to end this abhorrent state by means of suicide (18). A different individual will
accept the limitations of knowledge, and will attribute the mysteries of the universe to God. Although dread and confusions are not removed, there is hope for resolution waiting in the end. The individual maintains a purpose in life and continues the search for knowledge with the aid of faith (10). One last individual embraces the drama of life and rejects the false illusions of religion. This person comes to terms with absurdity and understands the impossibility of achieving a higher truth, yet doesn’t give up searching for knowledge. Life has a purpose (21).

It is this last individual that Camus hails and personifies in his text “The Myth of Sisyphus”. The thinker recounts the ancient Greek legend of a man who, drunk with passion for life, cheats death for a time by binding it in chains. The gods later punish him with the eternal tedium of pushing a boulder up a mountain. Every time he summits he is condemned to watch the weight tumble down to the valley floor. The futile strife thus deprives him of a meaningful life and of his humanity. Yet, in spite of Sisyphus’ penance, Camus encourages us to imagine him as content, for he will always find purpose in the act of pushing up the boulder (23).

Now when confronting the absurdity of my condition what path must I take? As I share Sisyphus’s passion for life, I must overrule suicide. If there is anything of positive value I can draw from my grandmother’s passing is a will to enjoy every second of my existence. I find myself then deriving my selfhood from the other two individuals. I have decided to embrace the absurdity that is this world, this relentless and jealously secretive universe. Yet, equally stubborn, I refuse to relinquish my faith. As the rebellious and pious spirit of Kierkegaard once taught me, I choose to remain interested in “the problem”, in “the possibility” (Kaufman 111). I have decided to seek God within the depths of my own subjectivity and without the aid of the written and the spoken word.
The Chapel

My mind is at rest for I picture myself now in a most humble and rudimentary church. I think of Rothko’s Chapel (Plate 3), populated by simple and dark canvases with very little to stare at, but much to look into. I find meaning and reassurance in the words of Dominique de Menil, who commissioned the project, when she said:

Rothko created a modulated ensemble of majestic paintings. The dark purplish tones have a soothing effect, yet they retain enough brilliance to stimulate the mind. The black surfaces invite the gaze to go beyond. The chapel is a place conducive to spiritual activity. We are cut off from the world and its suffocating multiplicity, able to wander in the infinite. Lacking the immensity of the desert, it is in the confines of a restricted place that we can embrace 'the whole'. Here we are nowhere and everywhere; here we can find a blessed wholeness, a sense of unity. (Stoker 90)

Back in the stairwell, my own chapel, I am likewise separated from the busy and saturated world outside. Ruptured from nature itself, without a raising and setting sun, the space becomes timeless. I stand before a concrete cathedral, rendered with Franciscan austerity by the earthly hands of building contractors. Within it I see no elaborate renditions of apostles or saints, but the very abstracted fresco of a porous rock. In each thumb-sized hole I see a mysterious grotto, and within it a virginal apparition of deep blues, greens, and violets. The cool electric light above bathes the scene with a subtle mantle that makes the concrete shimmer as I move, revealing the full extent of its relief. With every day that passes I feel more at home with this concrete wall. As
I inspect it, I lightly run the palm of my hand through its surface, intent on reading in its abstraction the encoded secrets of the universe.

I suddenly shiver with fervor, a slight reassurance, a feeling that inside this room, before this very scene, I have heard and felt the presence of God and my Grandmother. In the glorious height of this moment Kierkegaard’s voice echoes once again within: “When he (the individual) is nearest to being in two places at the same time he is in passion…and passion is also the highest expression of subjectivity” (Kaufman, 115). Such is the quality of the places and surfaces that inspire my work. They are capable of anchoring me down to this terrestrial present, yet they offer the means by which my spirit can take flight. Through them I experience every beat of my heart, I live in the moment, and too, I get lost in time.

The Quince Tree and the Clock

I now feel a burning desire to make this moment eternal and in painting I find the instrument to accomplish my vision. For this enterprise I have drawn inspiration from two artists whose work and practice I greatly admire. The late Spanish painter Antonio López García is a veteran in the task of working from observation. Despite his old age you might still see him in a busy street rendering a view of his beloved Madrid. Years he spends laboring on the same image, building the surface through myriads of layers; adjusting here, erasing there as the city changes before his eyes. Composed of an unfathomable air of patience and persistence, García seems to be more interested in the process of making the work than on the final result. He exploits life’s ever-changing nature as purpose for perpetuating the creation of his paintings. This persistence
is evidenced in the 1992 documentary “El Sol del Membrillo” or “Dream of Light”, which follows him through the production of a painting of a quince tree (Plate 7).

Throughout the duration of months we see the artist meticulously measuring and rendering leaves and fruits, often marking them with paint in order to document their changing nature. We watch him build a tent around the sapling and work through cold and warm weather, under torrential rain and the brilliant sun. The artist stubbornly pursues a particular time of the day he longs to capture, when the sun shines from the right angle and illuminates the pear-like fruits with a delightful golden light. Yet his resilience in the end proofs unfruitful. Unfortunately, Madrid’s cloudy sky avariciously holds the light back, forbidding him the perfect image. Eventually he acknowledges defeat and shifts his attention to another work, leaving us with an unfinished, yet captivating work of art (Erice). Ultimately, I find legacy in Antonio’s determination. His daily struggles effectively transform a quotidian experience into a profound and transcendent memory.

Josephine Halvorson is another artist who has motivated my love for observational painting. The young American travels across the nation in search for surfaces and abandoned objects, paintings she describes are waiting to be discovered. The nomad artist carries her supplies along, transporting her studio to wherever the source might be. In the Art 21 special short “Josephine Halvorson is on the Clock”, the camera follows the artist throughout the production of a painting depicting a clock from a street mural. Similar to López García, Halvorson works at a close proximity from the subject, using a portable tent and bug spray as shields from the often unforgiving elements. Throughout the day we follow as she labors to capture the likeness of the clock and the naïve gesture that first brought it to life. With avid scrutiny, her hand
also captures the nuances of the surface’s texture, including holes, cracks, and peelings of the wall paint. Moved by a love for the simplicity and history of these surfaces, she is compelled to capture the whole experience. Halvorson strives to make a personal replica of the scene, using oil paint as the facilitator. The artist herself mentioned: “I love how color can almost magically transform into something: it can become wood, it can become concrete, it can become heat. I wouldn’t understand the object if I were just meditating on it. It has to go through this empathetic medium of paint” (Halvorson, Samet).

Unlike the elder Spanish painter, Halvorson is expeditious in the making of the work. Time is a precious commodity, for she dedicates only one session to finishing the paintings. When the light begins to fade on the western sky, Halvorson knows her work is near completion (Plate 8). She rushes through the final touches and with an air of frustration she too gives in to nature’s demands. Towards the ending of the video we find that, unsatisfied with her result, the painter returned to the location countless times, resolved to make the right painting (Miller and Ravich).

Josephine Halvorson’s self-limitation encourages her to exploit the expressiveness of oil paint. The result is a work that feels fresh and immediate. Though the production of my own paintings exceeds the limit of one day, I have learned to take full advantage of every session. I work swiftly, manipulating the paint, seeking to capture with fluidity and ease the physicality of my surface, always aware that once the paint dries it will forever stay.

Halvorson has accustomed herself to finding inspiration in the commonplace. She has described this search as “listening to things which want to be painted” (Halvorson, Bui). I have attuned myself to the world with a similar mindset. And so, I go about in my daily activities,
looking for subjects that might take me on a spiritual journey. I pace along the halls of the museum that life has now become, looking for open, flat surfaces that communicate a sense of peace and grandeur. It was in this daily examination that I first walked into my humble cathedral, sacred nest where I now so devotedly endeavor.

The Ritual

Determined to faithfully capture the essence of the concrete wall, I have decided to work directly from observation, engulfed in all the silence and virtue it has to offer. The narrow location has forced me to divide eleven feet of the wall’s length into three canvases. To correct the inconvenience of separating a perfect scene I searched in the wall’s surface for natural partitions I could use as real dividers. Carrying on the legacy of Josephine Halvorson’s nomadic practice, in every session I transport my painting supplies downstairs, to where the landing patiently waits. The back-breaking job includes carrying a heavy metal rolling cart containing the palette, an equally burdensome easel, a canvas, and a large tool box where I keep all my paint tubes and brushes. I carefully transport these items, always aware that a misstep would possibly mean my undoing.

This physical strife is almost liturgical in nature. Every day I must put my body through this test, which strengthens my soul with determination and clears my mind for the task ahead. The exercise also prepares me for the inevitable struggle that painting promises to be. For long hours I must stand, walking back and forward in a continuous waltz, ignoring the pain that will eventually creep up from the soles of my feet. Faithful to my cause I embrace this sweet pain. Stubbornly so, Sisyphus incarnate, I am set on climbing the mountain. With every step I take I
aspire to arrive closer to that higher truth I so passionately seek, while also risking the possibility of never achieving it.

Exhausted, at the end of every session, I finally succumb to the weight of this boulder that is the arduous act of painting. As I watch it tumble down, I burn with impatience for the next occasion where I will once again lift it against my back to set on the journey up. Therein lies my life’s purpose, in the cyclic struggle, in that constant search for knowledge. Antonio, is this the same fire that burns you so, fueling your persistence? Bless your soul old man, you give courage and strength to my young, unbroken back.

Conception

The painting of the concrete wall begins with my confrontation of a white surface, which I aim to cover up using thick patches of paint. Tubes of Zinc and Titanium white endure the constant extraction of their malleable, life-giving substance. In the palette, the solid river of white is joined by tributaries of blue, red, green, sienna, and ochre, which are slowly stirred into shades of grey that will later transform into concrete. I load the brush with the heavy pigment and proceed to transfer it to the canvas in one, two, three strokes, until the material runs out. I employ fast, loose, intuitive gestures, closely following the relief of the real wall. As I press hard against the yielding cotton here, and lightly deposit some more paint there, I give raise to a new topography. Every new mixture allows for changes in color, light, and temperature, nuances I force myself to see in such a dim and monochromatic environment. As the white gesso finally succumbs to the heavy oil, I begin adding patches of bright reds, subtle violets, warm greens, and deep blues. The colors submit to the wet grey and the sweeping brush, leaving behind but a ghost
of their brief existence. Yet they subtly remain to reward the eyes of the patient spectator. It becomes clear to me now that through the process of rendering a real object, I have also embarked in the creation of an abstract painting. With this freedom of mind I chose to simplify and fully omit that which escapes my attention, exaggerate and glorify that which catches it, and invent and reimagine that which my vision dictates. Through this process, the new work of art declares its independence from the old source and assumes a new identity as a work of art.

The Highway

During the latter sessions, I had been so absorbed in the quietude of the space that I forgot I was standing on a dormant highway. The convenience of a nearby elevator deviated the traffic away from my location, leaving me undisturbed to pursue my task. Yet, a mechanical malfunction caused the rush of life to come pouring back through the steps, quickly inundating my tranquil chapel. A constant flow of students, teachers, and personnel would now make their way up and down, causing me to move aside here and there, renegotiating the space with every passerby. While some limited themselves to smiles and salutations, other regulars were more open on their support. Listening to brief notes of “Back at it!” and “Looking great!” to more elaborate commentaries about the painting’s growing resemblance to its subject, made me realize that the audience had also become engaged in the conversation. My cathedral suddenly became everyone else’s. Inadvertently I saw myself assuming the role of a part-time preacher, spreading my vision and message with a regular following, through the open book that the painting had now become. In every instance I let the work speak for me about my undying love
for the medium and my determination to elevate a commonplace surface to a transcendental experience.

A New Home

The concrete wall is finished and I can almost see it breathe through its many holes. Hanging in a new residency of white gallery walls the painting brandishes a new light. Like a leopard separated from its homogenous savannah, the painting exhibits its exotic coat of grey and black (Plate 4). An inch and a half of thickness separates it from the wall, changing image into object. Before my eyes, fabric and wood metamorphose into a heavy slab of concrete. The uncanny resemblance is carried out by that transformative aspect of color Josephine Halvorson had referred to. Far from being a mere act of mimicry or a statement of bravura, this trompe l’oeil effect is a byproduct of the intimate proximity I maintain with the real wall, which allows me to perceive and feel with great attention the peculiarities of the surface.

The essence of mimesis is mostly evident from a distance. As I step closer to the painting, it explodes into patches of color and paint, asserting its identity as an object of art (Plates 5-6). With great satisfaction I watch the audience approach the painting. Fingers point in the air, millimetres away from the paint, resisting the temptation to touch, yet intent on debunking the myth. This intimate exchange, which months ago I had kindled with the concrete wall, has now become a public event. The new rendition remains a record of my many internal and external confabulations with the space. Alternatively, it becomes an open source from which the audience can now experience their own revelations.
PART II: THE LIGHT BOX

The clock marks fifteen minutes past six in the afternoon and I make my way to the library, set on printing some paperwork for the seminar that is about to start. With haste, I claim the nearest computer and type the password in order to complete the task. Ignoring my urgency, the outdated machine sits on a standstill, slowly running its software like an old man searching his mind for long bygone memories. Defeated, I take a deep breath and look away from the screen. It’s going to be a good while. As I tilt my head up in disapproval, my eyes become focused on the light fixture above. I suddenly become entranced by the radiance that emerges from its eight tubes of fluorescent light. Before my eyes are urged away by the incandescence, I look on, determined to absorb as much information as I am allowed. I move across the scene and discern subtle changes of brilliance and color in each beam, perhaps induced by their different life stages. The ghostly, diffused glow of the light pulsates through an opaque sheet of white. Thin lines run across the surface forming a grid, which further arrests the excessive luster (Plate 10).

A peaceful scene is thus constructed before my eyes. No longer present in this world, I forget about the computer and my impatience. Presently nothing else occupies my mind but silence and that which now resembles a Japanese window. Through its thin rice paper I am bathed by a warm light, and in my ears resound the nostalgic words of Sarashina’ diary:

"They will come back next spring
those cherry blooms
that scatter from the tree.
But how I yearn for her who left
And never will return!" (Pattison 390)
Once again the memory of my lost love is invoked and her presence fully felt in the artificial light that now so floods my heart. However I find myself at peace, comforted by the sense of harmony and completeness the scene inspires.

The brusque sound of a command prompt calls my attention back to the computer. A fully loaded screen indicates it’s time to print some documents. I say goodbye to the fixture with the promise of returning soon, to forever capture its semblance in a piece of canvas.

Aboard the Pequod

On one early evening the Library welcomes back a most devoted son. Through its automatic doors enter my studio gear and my determination to materialize the vision of a painting (Plate 9). Great silence dominates the scene, only interrupted by the sounds of a page being flipped, or the rushed clicking of typing hands. The crowded room is hard at work, immersed in erudition. So I am left alone to bring to life another intimate conversation.

Raising tall before my eyes the large canvas unfolds like an immense sea of white. As if standing on the deck of the ancient Pequod, I contemplate a vast emptiness which fills my heart with admiration and horror. Alas, how I loathe this nothingness, this white monster that surfaces now in the near horizon! Seized by a mad craze, I call out around the library floor for my unresponsive crew. There she blows! Brace yourselves you fools! What are you waiting for? Make for the harpoons! To the boats! Let’s kill this beast where it stands! Yet, as they finally acknowledge my presence, I am greeted with bewildered looks. What is this absurdity that unravels before them, this mad task? Where are his books, his computer, his calculator, his
Hollister shirt? Has this man lost his place, his time? Lonely old Ahab indeed I am. Misunderstood, forced to confront this evil all by himself. In my ears resound his strident voice as he cries:

“Oh, hard! That to fire others, the match itself must needs be wasted! What I’ve dared, I’ve willed; and what I’ve willed, I’ll do! They think me mad...; but I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that’s only calm to comprehend itself! . . . The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereupon my soul is grooved to run” (Melville 186).

And so, filled with fervor and purpose, I slowly direct my ship and my flock to the righteous task of painting the lights.

The Grid

The sessions in the library focused on depicting the light emitted by the lamp. I had originally intended on painting the grid from observation. However, the color of the structure was hard to discern. Overpowered by the luminescence flowing from behind the lines, I was often compelled to look away every short while. It soon became evident that this image stubbornly resisted being painted from observation. Defeated, yet filled with resolve to complete the task, I relocated the painting to the studio, where I began working from memory. Before covering the entire surface with paint, I had estimated the width of the lines in the grid, which I then drew on the surface with all the surgical precision a ruler can offer. The sketch, now mostly buried in layers of paint, remained visible in the empty border I had left unworked. Following these guidelines I taped over the structure of the grid, leaving the necessary openings that I then thoroughly flooded with a dark mauve tone, accented by hints of red and green.
After the paint had dried I proceeded to remove the tape, revealing, to my dismay, utter chaos. It appears that before alchemizing into a solid, the paint forced its way out of the constraining tape, following small ridges and crevices which the thick layers of paint below had created. The result was too far from the perfection I sought. Making matters worse I also found that the grid’s thickness was miscalculated. The lines, bolder than expected, almost overpowered the luminescence of the tubes I had worked so hard to achieve.

Borrowing strength and determination from old Antonio López’s practice, I began correcting the state of my flat, abstracted quince tree. Reclaiming the various tints of grey from the surroundings I slowly began, free handedly, thinning down seventy feet of horizontals and verticals. Then, through continuous layers of mauve and red I began to gradually build the structure of the lines. Holding my breath, I fought the tremulous impulses of my human, imperfect hand. With every stroke I drew it seemed resolved to manifest every beat of my heart. Patiently, I struggled with my anatomy for days and weeks, defining the grid, perfecting it, improving it, giving it all the life and depth it never exercised in the real world. Moving left to right, then right to left, I romanced with the surface. Agnes Martin, is this the same intimacy you experienced in the seclusion of your New Mexico sanctuary? You, who so passionately spoke about the power of the horizontal line. You who transcribed with the movement of your hand the calmness of the sea¹? You, gentle soul, who so incessantly sought after the voice of silence²?

Strolling along the ample halls of Dia Beacon I am beguiled by your calm meditations. See how

¹ “And I thought there wasn’t a line that affected me like a horizontal line. Then, I found that the more I drew that line, the happier I got. First I thought it was like the sea . . . then, I thought it was like singing! Well, I just went to town on that horizontal line.” (Popova 2014)
² “My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in artwork which is also wordless and silent.” (Wei 2005)
your bands of color make me pause, how they transport me to my hometown beach (Plate 11). Waves of red, yellow, blue, red yellow, blue, continuously run towards me, soothingly bathing my feet. Now watch as they reemerge in my own painting in the guise of fluorescent beams: pink, orange, yellow, blue, orange, green, yellow, pink. Hear them now. They sing for you!

In “Light Box” I wanted to represent a real surface that resisted observation. So I made a painting instead, an abstraction, that which Rosalind Krauss once referred to as “what art looks like when it turns its back on nature”\(^3\), or that which Greenberg defined as “art that calls attention to art”\(^4\). Seen from the library floor, the fixture’s grid was a simple, dark and muted element, overpowered by the radiance of whites. In my painting it now emanates its own fiery cadmium light, demanding equal scrutiny as the artificially fluorescent plane below. Turning to Krauss once again for inspiration I sought in my grid the manifestation “not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree”.

And so the painting spoke and now revealed, in the convergence of horizontals and verticals, squares of light that detonated as I moved my eye across the plane. And I, a good listener, reciprocated the conversation by giving color to this light. Reclaimed from all around the painting, hints of blue, green, red, orange, and violet flare up as I traverse the surface of the work. I remain enticed by this illusion, exploring the grid, locked away in its geometric form. Fatigued, my vision makes its way back to the serene realm of the lights, where I leave you as I leave this world, caught in a reverie.

\(^3\) (Krauss 1979)  
\(^4\) (Greenberg 1960)
PART III: BLUE FIELD

Here I am again back in this place of silence and introspection that the Library represents. I sit now in a reading cubicle, an intimate, empty hole I have dived into many times in search for rest and seclusion. For three years I have been frequenting this spot, never caring much for its appearance. My heavy eyelids have always found irresistible gravity in its dark blue upholstered walls. Yet now here I sit, fully awake and inspired, lost in this ocean that extends before my eyes (Plate 12-13). Countless parallel horizons are suggested by depressions in the carpet. Their limitless course mirrors the continuity of waves. Up and down, side to side, I explore the surface as I follow these lines, helplessly bemused. A long spotlight subtly bathes the scene with a spectral hue of green. In this electric dusk I am able to perceive the shades and colors of a dense forest of fibers. As I am drawn near to inspect their intricate texture I am lost in a dense forest of weave. Threatened by their grasp, I lean back to the safety of the chair. From afar I watch now as these particles converge into large masses of color.

The Monk

A cool air raises heavy with the foreboding feeling of a menacing storm. Here I am now transported to a Baltic beach, where Caspar David’s monk stands before the immensity of a dark sea and sky that seem to stretch high and deep into infinity (Plate 14). The scene is barren, cold, desolate. There is nothing else for the man to see but black waves and dark grey clouds heralding a winter storm or the coming of night. In a translation of Friedrich’s own words about the painting, Andrea Meyertholen sheds light:
Speaking as though the reader were already embedded in the scene, Friedrich addresses us, urging, almost demanding, that we walk in the monk’s sandy footprints. When we look outward, the object of our gaze would be not wind or water, but a limitless expanse, too dark to discern forms and too inscrutable to fathom. Despite the futility of our efforts, the artist suggests that we would wantonly and arrogantly try anyway. Some may find this struggle uplifting and exhilarating, others humbling and demoralizing (408).

Following the artist’s invitation, I slip into the battered shoes of the monk and contemplate the infinite dark horizon. I am reduced to nothingness by the immensity of the carpeted skies that stretch before me. I stand alone on this barren field, once again reminded of death and the brutal absence of my lost love, posing questions and hearing nothing but the crashing of waves, the sound of my robes flapping in the wind and the occasional spray of salt on my face. Insignificant and fearful I feel, standing before the storm of life and the mysteries it unfolds.

A Sublime Feeling

Through the clapping of distant thunder I hear the words of Edmund Burke when he says: “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too” (Morley, Burke 15). The 18th century Irish philosopher explained that in the presence of a natural event of great magnitude, such as a storm in the sea, or an erupting volcano, we are seized by a great degree of astonishment. That overwhelming power and majesty we experience, which transcends our
ability to grasp these events in our imagination, is the sublime. So is the terror that quickens our hearts in the realization of danger and impending death. The author doesn’t limit the sublime to experiences of natural phenomena. Anything that casts unrestrained power over us and which potentially threatens our existence such as a wild untamed horse, a wolf, a ruler, a God, the edge of a mountain upon which we stand, can be considered sublime (Burke 141). Our terror can also be inspired by additional factors such as darkness or excessive light and perceptions of vastness and infinity, such as that which the blue field awakes. In other words, a sublime feeling can be encountered in situations which stupefy our senses, challenge our perception and imagination and as result unchain our insecurities and greatest fears (Burke 148).

Immanuel Kant who was a follower of Burke’s ideas made an important contribution to the dialog. The German philosopher disagreed with Burke’s notion that the sublime was exuded only by events from the natural world. Instead, he suggested that the sublime describes not “an object of the senses” but a state of mind, the abstract feelings we derive from these events. Kant corroborates:

But in what we are accustomed to call sublime there is nothing at all that leads to particular objective principles and forms of nature corresponding to them; so far from it that for the most part nature excites the Ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation. (Kant 104)

In this way, a storm at the sea, or a dark-blue field, are not sublime in themselves. It is the feelings we experience in their presence that can behave as such.

Bathed in the light of this knowledge I have now come to understand that the emotions which enraptured me after my grandmother’s physical absence, and which I now repeatedly
encounter in these surfaces, are not so different from those described by Burke and Kant. The vast emptiness that fills my soul, the immense silence of the universe, and the absolute feelings of abandonment, anguish, and despair are indeed sublime experiences. Their complexity is so great that they perplex the senses and the imagination. They are inspired by the overwhelming power of that inevitable natural phenomenon that is death and my inability to cope with it rationally. Yet they manifest their sublimity in their formlessness and boundlessness as states of mind. I am once again alongside Camus, lamenting the absurdity of my condition, succumbing to the immensity of these emotions which seem to be always in flight, one step ahead of my grasp. Yet hope subsists.

Coupled with the emotional pain awoken by the sublime also rises a feeling of pleasure. According to Kant, a sublime experience like that of standing at the edge of a cliff, causes an adrenaline rush that impels us to awaken our “vital powers”. In that instance of utter awareness we feel as alive as ever (Kant, 101).

French philosopher Jean François Lyotard, in his interpretation of Kant, pointed out pleasure can be felt in the strife of our imagination to rationalize the sublime and in such bring back a sense of order, harmony, and understanding. Lyotard then contributes his own notion in how art can aid our imagination in this purpose. He cites:

Here then is an account of the sublime feeling; a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any ‘it happens’, strikes it with ‘astonishment’ (at lower intensities the soul is seized with admiration, veneration, and respect. The soul is thus dumb, immobilized, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art,
the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life. (Lyotard, Morley, 35)

In the previous passages I had expressed how my grandmother’s departure had filled me with a resolve to appreciate every moment of my life. Now with the help of Kant’s reasoning I can understand why. I can comprehend my intent in keeping these feelings burning, my willingness to experience the almost physical pain that they inflame. By summoning the sublime I walk to the edge of that mountain and look down and feel alive. My confrontation of death reminds me of life’s frailty, of the uncertainty that awaits. Yet, while I tremble in fear for the possibility of utter extinction my heart beats loudly, my senses are sharpened, and so is my awareness of reality, of the now. I am appeased by the fact that I am alive. Death may come anytime, but as of this minute I live, and nothing else matters, only painting. As Lyotard proposed, in the creation of a work of art we manifest our celebration of life, the taming of nature, and the exacerbation of pain and pleasure which make our existence so palpable.

Part IV: THE BRICK WALL

In the same building where I once fell in love with a concrete wall, there lies another stairwell that also gained my devotion. It is a path I seldom choose. Dark and deserted, the stairs are enclosed within a circular tower of red brick (Plate 15). As I make my way down, the steps lead me directly to a narrow landing where a concave wall rises tall as it wraps around me. Before continuing my descent I pause to contemplate it. There is something unusual about this brick wall. It sets it apart from that terracotta uniformity I have grown so familiar with in this academic metropolis. High above, a single bulb of fluorescent light inundates the scene with the radiance
of a full moon. Looking up I am enthralled by a crescendo of luminescence that concludes in a glorious and blinding silver. Down here in the shadows where I am barely touched by the heavenly glow I am but a passive spectator. Too far is the light for me to reach, but how warm is its glow! Standing before this earthly empyrean I am moved by that Light which Dante once described as “Love which moves the sun and the other stars” (Alighieri, Mandelbaum, and Armour 541).

I have chosen to make of this most humble space a metaphor for the divine. When as a child I roamed the halls of a colonial church where my father worked, I watched as many devotees knelt down before saints, with hands clasped, immersed in a passionate dream. I became fascinated by their unflagging reverence in what I plainly observed to be figures of stone and wood. Watching them I soon realized that with a resolute faith I could find God anywhere, even in a small piece of rock. Now as I stand here in this silent corner I exercise the same conviction.

Embracing painting as my daily ritual I worked in close communion with this wall. I labored there for long hours, and days, and weeks. I endured the ruthlessness of cold and hot weather, and the ever changing daylight that would force its way in, sometimes bathing the scene in a golden glow, sometimes engulfing it in darkness. Striving through the inconsistent lighting, my eyes were pushed beyond their bounds in the act of perceiving color. Yet, their resilient stare was rewarding.

The wall (Plates 16-17), which in the beginning I had so easily dismissed as a boundless sea of red, now upon close inspection widened its palette to reveal earth greens, blues, violets, and yellows. I was astonished to discover the formal variations that occurred within the bricks, each different from the other. Here a magenta rectangle hovers over a field of red, pulsating with
its own light and energy. There a blue-colored brick is dissected by two yellow diagonals, separating its form into three polygons. Every variation offered me the possibility to improvise, contributing my own colors and shapes to the conversation. The surface calls back my scrutiny, to capture with a firm hand, the small and deep holes and crevices manifested in the hardened and aged clay. I am also invited to contribute my interpretation of glazed drips of white paint, a blurred chalk scribble, and countless bits of thick double-sided tape, all surviving testimonies of a rich history of human action.

I now direct my attention to the white spaces between the bricks, open labyrinthine highways where I find direction and too get lost. I watch as the horizontal lines bend following the natural curvature of the wall. Then I follow the verticals, slightly drawn towards their above and below vanishing points, bent by the will of this panoptic rendering of the wall. I weave this net with liquid strings of zinc and titanium. I weave on, asserting control with my deliberate hand. What would this surface be otherwise, without the clean order birthed by the white lines? Dionysian discord!

Now after one last motion I put my brush down and I step back to fully acknowledge the fruits of this long enterprise. From a distance I watch as my painting imitates the features of the old wall, like a tender child naively following after the steps of his cherished father. I witness the shy arching of the painted bricks, attempting to break the inescapable flatness of the surface with a mere illusion. Yet, I remain transfixed by the essence of that curve, which Bachelard so faithfully described as follows: “The grace of a curve is an invitation to remain. We cannot break away from it without hoping to return. For the beloved curve has nest-like powers; it incites us to possession,
it is a curved “corner”, inhabited geometry (Bachelard 146)”. And so, the curve transforms into an embrace, and I a child, sheltered, within the warm lock of my grandmother’s arms.

PART V: THE NAIL AND CONCLUSIONS

Mother death has come to pay me a visit. Upon her departure she plucked a rose from my garden. With the gift of absence she has reminded me of her presence. As she blows her goodbye kiss, in a brief gesture her lips imbibe the air around me, leaving a note of silence which prevails long after. My grandmother’s departure from this world is the single most influential event of my existence to date. For the first time I find myself confronting a situation over which I can exert no control. The vast emptiness I am left to endure is an impossible place to conquer.

From the tree of faith I have cultivated for years God has cut away the fruits of knowledge I now so need. Ignorant and forsaken I roam, a beast on this earth, driven by primal instincts and an unquenchable necessity to know.

I walk alone in my studio, contemplating the silence that fills the air, undisturbed but by the low humming of the air conditioning above, an occasional ringing in my ears, and the beating of my heart. In that defining act where internal and physical quietude become one, I open my eyes and I see the wall before me. In a white and empty desert of wood a solitaire nail stands, accompanied by nothing but the shadow it casts (Plates 18-19). All around, the arid terrain unveils crevices carved by age, craters banged by hammer misfire, nails buried deep within wood grain and layers of paint, and minute holes, which prevail as memorials for other nails that once stood there. A bright fluorescent light bathes the scene, cautious to only reveal its yellows, pink, blue-violet tones and the intricate patterns of the wood, to long-observing eyes. The small nail remains
the lone survivor in a sea of white, patiently waiting for the hand and the hammer that will once and for all pluck it out of existence.

I grieve for the nail and its uncertain future. Its lonely figure recalls the pensive monk by the sea, diminished and humbled by the vast expanse that stretches all around it. While exploring its surface I am made aware of its physicality. Yet I can also enter it, beyond its white expanse, where the scene promises to become a void in its own, a threshold to the unknown. Naked and abandoned, expecting its own demise, the nail becomes an extension of myself. Under the skin of black steel I am reminded of the tragedy of my condition and I tremble in fear. Yet from above and away I contemplate the scene in all its magnificence, and I find peace in the realization that unlike that fixed nail, I still have a dynamic life to experience.

Last Remarks

Now at my journey’s end I stand alone at the gallery, contemplating the product of laborious months. I rejoice watching the concrete wall shimmering as I explore its length. With every step I take the lights reveal an abundance of marks, woven together in delightful harmony. I then rest my gaze upon Blue Field. I feel at peace, entranced by its throbbing light. I shift my eyes towards Light Box and its rhythmic, calming glow. I then approach the sea of white, and I make out that single nail which inspired so much poetry inside. Alas, if only the digital image could capture in its highest resolution the intricacy of textures, colors, and forms that charge its surface! I turn left and I meet the curved brick wall. What a strife it was to capture every brick’s individuality, two hundred and ninety five paintings within one painting! And oh that slight curve, it entices as it subverts the flat plane.
In one last motion my eyes meet the concrete wall once again, seductress above all, undeniable queen. She pulls me close and invites me to caress her. As I run my fingers through her skin I rediscover so much texture, so much physicality! And with what subtlety its grey veneer discloses color, and depth! The heavy painted canvas conspires with a structure of thick stretchers to create the illusion of a concrete slab. Yet, unlike its real counterpart, this painting has managed to stand out with more life and energy. Its open surface, similar to that of the White wall, allowed me to paint with unrestrained expressive gesture.

I did not enjoy the same luxury in the other works were my hand found constraint within their forms. If I could repaint the brick wall I would approach it with more looseness, rendering first the whole rather than the specific. I would also use a thicker application of paint to build more relief on the surface to further accentuate the illusion of objecthood. I want to follow this method in my subsequent pieces. I will be searching for more flat spaces charged with history and materiality, were I will be able to exert the most of my skills and creativity. Apart from this group of physical paintings I would like to pursue another series, perhaps more tranquil and less textured, following the path of Light Box and Blue Field. Their glow exerts an element of hope and transcendence that complements my exploration of the sacred. Perhaps these two paths will cross one day to unveil exceptional works of art.

Conclusions

Far from being absurd, my search for God and my grandmother through my paintings is a noble attempt at finding meaning and purpose in life. I have come to realize that in my strife for reason and knowledge there are no answers to be found, only more grief, confusion, and fear.
Embracing my limitations, I have chosen to focus my scrutiny on this intimate and approachable material world, which so often escapes our regard. Adopting the transformative alchemy and expressiveness of oil paint, I challenged myself with the task of depicting the walls and surfaces that accompany me on my daily errands. Painting them from observation not only empowered me to faithfully capture their material presence. It also allowed me to perpetuate fleeting emotional states and moments of spiritual enlightenment that my conversations with these surfaces inspired.

Now elevated to the platform of Painting, it is my hope that these personal experiences will transcend their place and time to reach a larger audience. My ambition is to share with every brushstroke the raw expression of my pains, fears, uncertainties, and passions; universal words in the language of life. It is my final intention to divulge my appreciation for the beauty and values the everyday life has to offer, especially in these often dull and busy digital days.

Epilogue

I silently walk away from my studio in heavy paces, gradually making way to the shadows while I turn off all the lights. As I push the heavy iron door I take a deep breath, and to the strident sound of its closure I let go and I find myself in peace. In painting, I have cheated death for a time and lived out my passion for life. I can conclude, that all is well.

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Easel and palette set up before the concrete wall
View of concrete wall with studio supplies
PLATE 3

ROTHKO CHAPEL, 1971
PLATE 4

CONCRETE WALL
Oil on Canvas
132 X 41 ½ inches
2016
PLATE 5

CONCRETE WALL

Detail 1
PLATE 6

CONCRETE WALL
Detail 2
PLATE 7

Still from “El Sol del Membrillo”, 1992
Still from “Josephine Halvorson is on the Clock”, 2013
Light Box in progress at the UF Architecture and Arts Library
PLATE 10

LIGHT BOX

Oil on Canvas

64 X 64 inches

2016
Agnes Martin

Untitled #9

Acrylic and graphite on linen

1999
Blue Field in progress
PLATE 13

BLUE FIELD
Oil on Canvas
45 X 30 inches
2016
Caspar David Friedrich

Monk by the Sea

Oil on Canvas

1808–10
Set up before a session painting Brick Wall.
PLATE 16

BRICK WALL

Oil on Canvas

48 X 64 inches

2016
PLATE 18

STUDIO WALL WITH SINGLE NAIL

Oil on Canvas
44 3/4 X 47 inches
2015
PLATE 19

STUDIO WALL WITH SINGLE NAIL

Detail
Concrete Wall as displayed in Open Conversations
Blue Field during opening reception
Blue Field, Light Box, and Concrete Wall
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Miguel A. Saludes was born in Havana, Cuba in 1989. He immigrated to the United States with his family in 2005 and settled in Miami, Florida. He pursued his Bachelor’s degree at Florida International University and graduated Summa Cum Laude in 2012. The following year he began his candidacy in the Masters of Fine Arts program at the University of Florida. He completed his degree in 2016.